

Myth #138: Fountains Going to the Dogs – and Cats and Horses Too by Guy Rocha, Former Nevada State Archivist

With much fanfare Carson City dedicated the Hermon Lee Ensign National Humane Alliance fountain on Labor Day, 1909. The polished granite fountain, then-located at the intersection of Carson and King streets in front of the State Capitol, was manufactured in Derby, Maine, and donated by the New York City animal rights organization. It was moved to its current location--some fifty feet to the west--by 1936 when the portion of King Street between Carson and Curry streets was condemned for the construction of a new Supreme Court and Library building.



The five-ton, six-foot plus high fountain, which includes a light fixture at the top, is composed of a six-foot diameter bowl with three lion head spouts where "men, horses and dogs" could drink. There are small cups at the bottom for cats, dogs and other animals. A plaque notes that the fountain was donated by the Humane Alliance in 1909.

The story goes that each state received one fountain, making a total of forty-eight in 1912. People occasionally contact the Nevada State Library & Archives believing that the fountain in their city and the one in Carson City are the only two left in the country.

Wrong on all counts!



While no definitive list of fountains is known to exist, there appear to have been as many as one hundred and twenty-five distributed throughout the nation. Some still exist. Nevada's only fountain is found in the state capital. Unfortunately, it has operated just sporadically over the years. The fountain last worked in the early 1990s thanks to a grant from Nevada's 125th Anniversary Commission and the efforts of Terry Sullivan, then director of the Nevada Department of General Services.

Notably, benefactor Hermon Lee Ensign died in New York City in 1899 before any fountains were manufactured. The self-made man who had acquired his fortune in journalism and advertising was devoted to the welfare of animals in a time when animal welfare was a growing concern in the country. "To him, animals were not merely inferiors or slaves, they were companions and friends, devoting themselves to man and dependent on him for their lives and happiness," according to National Humane Alliance promotional literature.

The Humane Alliance under the direction of President Harrison Grey Fiske, a New York City journalist and theatrical manager, made Ensign's dream of addressing animal welfare a reality. Minnie Maddern Fiske, Harrison's wife, was not only one of the leading actresses in the day, but also a prominent humanitarian and animal welfare advocate in her own right. She took up the cause for abused dray horses, called for the humane confinement of cattle being transported by rail to market, lectured against fur-trapping, and opposed bullfighting. The animal rights organization, spurred by the Fiskes, began donating fountains in 1906--the first dedicated in Derby, Maine,--through at least 1911. The Fiske Collection in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress contains several boxes of Mrs. Fiske's materials which relate to her work advocating the humane treatment of animals world-wide.

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The Fiske collection came to my attention through the pet project of Norman and Virginia "Bird" White of Minden, Nevada. Norm contacted me in 1998 and wanted to know more about Carson City's fountain, noting that while attending high school in Clinton, Missouri, the town also had a fountain donated by the National Humane Alliance.

Norm and Bird spent the next ten years periodically travelling around the country in their classic 1955 Pontiac sedan and 1955 Pontiac Safari station wagon trying to find every National Humane Alliance fountain. Many were found in such places as Ottumwa, Iowa; Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Auburn, New York; and Clarksville, Tennessee. Most had been moved at least once from their original locations, some were used as planters, and only a handful still operated.

Tragically, the Whites died in an automobile accident south of Minden on May 23, 2008. I paid tribute to Norm and Bird at the memorial ceremony at Douglas High School, and, now again, in dedicating this column in memory of all their good work for man and beast.

Photo credit: Top: The Carson City Herman Lee Ensign National Humane Alliance fountain in the intersection of Carson and King Streets, ca 1909. Photo courtesy of the Nevada State Archives.

Bottom: A photo, ca 1982, of the National Humane Alliance fountain on the grounds of the Nevada Supreme Court and Library building with the Nevada State Capitol in the background. Note the light fixture attached to the top of the fountain. Photo courtesy of the Nevada State Archives.

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